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Political news content in online and print newspapers:

Are online editions better by electoral democratic standards?

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Abstract

The electoral model of democracy holds the ideal of citizens who are well informed about political issues and actors, and regards it as a task of news media to provide citizens with high quality information. Against this ideal, the quality of political news in online news outlets is highly contested. While pessimists point out the dangers of increased competition for quality news online, optimists emphasize the potential benefits of unlimited space and interactivity online. To see which view holds true, this paper compares political news in popular and elite print newspapers and their respective online editions, during the 2013 National Election Campaign in Austria. Findings show that online editions score better than paper editions regarding the amount of political news, (party) diversity, and emotionalization, but differences between newspaper types were notable. Whereas elite newspapers cover politics online more extensively than in print, the reverse is true for popular newspapers. Leader focus is also strong in popular papers online. We conclude that the gap in quality between political news in elite and in popular newspapers is larger online. This might contribute to a wider gap between a well-informed elite audience and a lesser-informed popular news audience, when audiences switch from print to online news.

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Introduction

It has been two decades since print newspapers entered the online news market with their own online version. In the meantime, many other online news media have sprung up and compete with online newspapers both for readers and advertising revenue (Humprecht and Büchel 2013). This increase in competition, combined with the faster cycle of online news, has led to fears of negative consequences for political news quantity and quality in online media (e.g. Plasser 2005). Online news sites are increasingly used as a news source, especially by young people (e.g. Michtelstein and Boczkowski 2010). This means that a poorer political news offer in these media could contribute to the problems of low political interest and knowledge that exist in many Western democracies (Sparks 2003; Lee 2007; De Waal and Schoenbach 2010).

A normative perspective favoring electoral democracy (Sartori 1987) stresses the importance of political coverage that sufficiently informs people about politics, and presents a realistic picture of political events (Strömbäck 2005). As such, political news high in quality may help people to vote 'correctly', that is, for the political party that closest represents their own opinion (see Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2009), while low-quality news that provides an incorrect or incomplete picture of politics may hamper their ability to do so. Aside from other influences such as personal interest and historical allegiance, news media are an important influence on how people vote (Kioussis et al. 2006; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007). Media provide up-to-date information about politicians' performances and viewpoints, and often reach large audiences. Especially during election campaigns, it is thus important that (political) news is high in quality, in order to be most beneficial to the electorate, and as such, to democracy.

In this paper, we will compare political news during an election campaign in online and print newspapers on a number of indicators related to news quality from an electoral-democratic perspective. Although the electoral-democratic model is a strongly idealized and, for news, supply-focused model, it provides clear criteria for the information that news should supply during campaigns, which have often been used in research on media quality and commercialization or popularization (see e.g. Reinemann et al. 2012). Other functions of news media in democracy, or criteria of news quality related to its reception – that is, how well certain characteristics of news content aid in improving attention to the news and understanding of the news by its audience (Dahlgren 2000) – can and should be studied separately, using different criteria (Jandura and Friedrich 2014). Here, we look at news supply using indicators related to the information function of political news in a democracy, and the degree to which this coverage is characterized by a commercial logic (see Landerer 2013). Commercialism often conflicts with criteria for quality derived from the electoral-democratic

model. Moreover, we assess differences between so-called elite and popular newspapers, since popular newspapers are presumed to be influenced more strongly by a commercial logic than elite newspapers, and are subsequently seen as harmful for democracy by some (Sparks 2000; Rooney 2000; Skovsgaard 2014). Our overall research question is as follows:

RQ: *How do the online editions of popular and elite newspapers compare to the print editions regarding the quality of political news during an election campaign, following electoral democratic quality standards?*

We answer this question using political news coverage from six Austrian national newspapers (three popular, three elite; in both their online and print editions) during the Austrian National Election campaign of 2013. We focus on newspapers and their online editions because of their traditional function as provider of political news during campaigns, in addition to television. Austria is an interesting case because of its overall rather popularized press market (Magin and Stark 2014). Most research on quality in online and print newspapers has been conducted in the United Kingdom and Germany, where elite and popular media may be further apart in terms of quality (Magin and Stark 2014; see also Sparks 2000). By comparing print newspapers with their online equivalents for both popular and elite newspapers, we shed light on the aspects of quality of political news coverage (during an election campaign) held important by the electoral democratic model in today's changing media landscape.

News quality from an electoral democratic perspective

What is 'quality' news? Aside from a general set of criteria and good journalistic practices, such as accuracy and transparency regarding sources (Shapiro 2010), the quality of particular genres of journalism depends on the purpose attributed to these genres. For political news, the general expectation is that news contributes to democracy (Christians 2009). In turn, how it should do so depends on what form of democracy one regards as ideal.

The electoral model of democracy (Sartori 1987) is one of these forms. It is what Strömbäck calls a 'realistic' model of democracy (Strömbäck 2005, 334), closer to actual democracies in Western Europe than other democratic models such as the participative or the deliberative model, which require much more involvement by citizens. In the electoral model, citizens choose their representatives, but otherwise their role in politics is limited. Citizens do not, and should not, influence policy directly (Sartori 1987). This type of democracy thus means that people have to know whom to vote for in order to have their viewpoints represented in parliament. Also, according to the electoral model, they should ideally vote based on these viewpoints, or for

politicians that they think perform well as representatives (e.g. Ferree et al. 2002; Jandura and Friedrich 2014).

News media have the task to provide voters with sufficient and correct information about politics so that they are able to vote in an informed way (Strömbäck 2005; Lau and Redlawsk 1997), while avoiding any type of discourse that may distract from forming issue-based opinions. This task forms the basis of a number of quality criteria for political news during an election campaign. Firstly, the news should provide enough information about politics. This means not only that there should be a large quantity of news about politics, but also that it should include the viewpoints and performances of all political parties taking part in the election, without bias towards a particular party. A strong focus on leaders at the expense of other candidates (Takens et al. 2015) or coverage with strong emotional rather than detached overtones (Martinsen 2009) could hamper this ideal of rational opinion-building and voting.

While elite media supposedly adhere to electoral democratic quality standards (Friedrich and Jandura 2012, 404), popular or tabloid news is often regarded as the opposite of quality news, by being apolitical, trivial, simplified, emotionalized and sensationalized (e.g. Esser 1999; Sparks 2000; Rooney 2000; Bakker and Scholten 2013). Their focus on what the target audience wants to read, and thus on what sells (to this audience directly or to advertisers) is seen as the cause for these undesirable characteristics; a focus confirmed by popular journalists (Skovsgaard 2014). The same line of argument also applies to online newspapers, which can follow their audiences' preferences through tracking their clicks on individual news stories. This could make even 'quality' media more likely to publish what their audience wants to read rather than what they should know according to democratic ideals (Welbers et al. forthcoming).

Political news quality in online and print editions

However, the discussion of online media and their contribution to or risk for electoral democracy is more complicated than just this general popularization or commercialization argument. Compared to print newspapers, online editions have a number of characteristics relevant in this context.

Firstly, the size of the online edition is less limited by its format (a web site) than print news (a paper with about the same amount of pages every day). Also, the role of the audience is more pronounced, both directly in the comment sections of stories and discussion fora (e.g. Thurman 2008), as well as indirectly through click rates. This latter aspect influences news selection, not

only for the online edition (Vu 2014), but also for the printed newspaper (Welbers et al. forthcoming).

Finally, online news can be published anytime, and can always be updated or removed later (Deuze and Yeshua 2001). In practice, this flexibility puts journalists under pressure to publish news quickly, in order to be the first to publish certain news stories (Anderson 2011), while fact checking can be postponed. This time pressure furthermore seems to promote practices such as copying press releases and wire-service content or using the content of other media as a source (Boczkowski and De Santos 2007; Boczkowski 2009).

Given these characteristics, the online editions of elite newspapers might widen or narrow the gap between them and their popular counterparts. This gap might widen, for instance, because popular newspapers may use the Internet to produce news to pursue their commercial goals even more strongly while elite newspapers may use it to produce high-quality news, as happened a decade ago in the United Kingdom (Sparks 2003). On the other hand, the gap could also narrow because quality outlets may give in to the presumable forces of the market, especially online, where less money can be made from subscriptions (unless paywalls are used, which is not the case in Austria). Elite newspapers in both Sweden and The Netherlands, for example, ‘tabloidize’ in their online edition and become more like their popular counterparts (Andersson 2013; Welbers et al. forthcoming; see also Reinemann et al. 2012).

Below we discuss the consequences these differences may have for news quality, following our criteria for political news quality according to the electoral model of democracy.

Amount of political news

A first indicator for the democratic quality of news during an election campaign is the amount of news about politics, since it is assumed that more supply of political news and thus political information provided by the media will lead to better informed citizens (e.g. Sparks 2000; McLachlan and Golding 2000). With the exception of election campaigns, popular newspapers presumably devote a low percentage of their total coverage to hard news topics such as national politics, while much of their coverage is on non-political soft news topics (Rooney 2000). Because of the large space available on websites compared to in print newspapers, we would expect that the amount of political news online will generally be higher than in print. However, resources and time are still limited even though online media provide more space (Oschatz et al. 2014). Moreover, one could also argue that the interactive elements of websites make it easier for journalists to focus on the news that audiences want to read (Vu 2014)—which is

presumably soft news rather than political coverage (Welbers et al. forthcoming). Our first sub-question thus reads:

RQ1a: *What is the amount of political coverage in online and print newspapers?*

Given the presumed focus on hard news in elite newspapers (Sparks 2000), we expect outlets from this type to contain a larger amount of political news than popular newspapers. However, it is possible that this difference is larger, or instead smaller, in online editions, if one media type has different priorities or strategies than the other. This leads to the following question:

RQ1b: *Is there a gap between the amount of political news in popular and in elite newspapers, and is this gap larger or smaller online compared to print?*

Diversity

A second requirement of news media in an electoral democracy is diversity (e.g. McQuail 1992; Mutz and Young 2011). This aspect of news quality is often associated with the ideal of the public sphere as a 'marketplace of ideas' (e.g. Voakes et al., 582; Napoli 1999, 8; Mutz and Young 2011, 1018): Citizens should have the opportunity to learn about many different viewpoints on various issues, so that they can form a well-informed and thoughtful opinion of their own, and vote accordingly.

Following this ideal within an electoral democracy, we focus on the coverage of the competing political parties. News that is perfectly diverse provides citizens with information about all political parties - their viewpoints, their successes or failures of candidates - to an equal extent during an election campaign (*open diversity*, see Van der Wurff and Van Cuilenburg 2001). Differences between outlets can reveal the extent to which the outlet also pays attention to the views of smaller parties. The more an outlet focuses on some political parties over others, the greater the chance for some kind of bias, and the lower diversity.

For online newspapers, more space could further diversity. So far, however, only Powers and Benson (2014) have demonstrated that this is the case. Moreover, the interactive elements of a website could increase diversity through facts or opinions supplied by the readers themselves in the forum or comments section below news stories in online editions. This input by the audience may then influence news selection and presentation by journalists. Some researchers point out that this may be particularly true for *tabloid* newspapers because it is their aim to echo the voice of the people rather than the establishment, unlike elite papers (e.g. Örnebring and Jonsson 2004; but doubts in Örnebring 2006 and Thurman 2014). For the diversity of party coverage,

which we measure here, this could mean a lower focus on government parties and more attention to the opposition, including new and populist parties, resulting in higher diversity. The interactive features of online media should make it even easier for popular newspapers to function as an alternative public sphere, as they make it easier for outlets to learn about people's viewpoints. However, online media appear not to have lived up to this potential (Örnebring 2008; Conboy and Steel 2010; Richardson and Stanyer 2011).

This could be because of the simultaneous process of commercialization. As we argued earlier, audience metrics make it easier for outlets to cater to audience preferences, also with respect to specific political preferences (Tandoc 2014). In addition, a faster news cycle means that journalists have less time to reflect on what they publish and which angles of a story to choose. So, biases of news selection based on routine, i.e., news values ingrained in journalistic training, are more likely to surface (Welbers et al. forthcoming). This leads to the following questions:

RQ2a: *How high is the diversity of political news in online and in print newspapers?*

RQ2b: *Is there a gap in the degree of diversity of political news in popular and in elite newspapers, and the size of this gap similar online and in print?*

Focus on leaders

A third indicator considers the focus on political leaders, or presidentialism (Langer 2007), a type of personalization of political news (Van Aelst et al. 2012). Political leaders, being powerful elite persons, are high in news value (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O'Neill 2001). So, they are relatively likely to be written about in the media, at the cost of politicians lower in status or of political institutions. However, from a democratic perspective a high leader focus is less desirable. It leads to personalized voting – voters who weigh evaluations of political leaders more heavily than issue positions (Takens et al. 2015) which goes against the ideals of the electoral democratic model, which holds both as important (Strömbäck 2005). Also, a stronger focus on leaders means less attention to other candidates of the same party, whom people may also vote for in countries with a preferential vote system such as Austria. One could thus argue that a strong focus on leaders goes against the political logic of such systems (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007, 66), and regard a low focus on leaders as a sign of news quality by electoral democratic standards.

Commercialization of news is seen as an important explanation for the personalization of political news (Langer 2007). Personalizing and simplifying news are ways to make it more attractive to a large audience, and focusing on leaders does both (Dahlgren 2000, see also Bird

2000 and Eilders 2006 for audience perspectives). A more competitive media environment in which news outlets follow these preferences more closely, such as the one found online, may therefore lead to a greater emphasis on leaders in times of election campaigns (see also Takens et al. 2015).

H1: *Political news is more focused on leaders online than in print.*

Popular newspapers, as mentioned previously, cater to the tastes of an audience that is as large as possible. This makes it likely that focus on leaders is stronger in popular newspapers than in elite newspapers, which presumably focus on making ‘quality’ news, for an audience that supposedly prefers ‘quality’ news. Whether this holds true to a similar extent online and in print depends on how strongly elite newspapers are affected by the commercialization pressures of their online version.

RQ3: *Is there a gap between the strength of leader focus in the political news in popular and in elite newspapers, and is the size of this gap similar online and in print?*

Emotionalization

In order to sell news to audience and advertisers, journalists may focus on those aspects of news events that people can identify with. This may also result in a greater use of emotions in their news coverage (Grabe et al. 2001; Donsbach and Büttner 2005). This, however, goes against the detached style of political news coverage preferred by the electoral democratic model (Jandura and Friedrich 2014), which evaluates political coverage low in emotionalization as higher in quality.

As with leader focus, more competition online and more possibilities to directly track audience preferences could result in more emotionalization in online media coverage.

H2: *Political news is more emotionalized online than in print.*

Again, popular newspapers are focused on following the tastes of a large, broad audience, with different preferences than the elite audience for elite media, which likely results in more emotionalized coverage in popular media (Reinemann et al. 2012). Whether this holds true to a similar extent online and in print editions again depends on how strongly elite newspapers are affected by the commercialization possibilities of their online version.

RQ4: *Is there a gap between the degree of emotionalization of political news in popular and in elite newspapers, and is the size of this gap similar online and in print?*

Case study, data and methods

This study analyzes the full political coverage of the online and print editions of six popular and elite newspapers, from August 19th until September 29th, 2013 (N=14,868), during the Austrian National Election Campaign for that year¹. None of these papers uses paywalls; all online content is freely available for everyone. Except for elite paper *Der Standard*, all newspapers also appear on Sundays. Since we focus on news supply during the overall campaign, having a Sunday edition or not does not matter for our comparison, meaning that *Der Standard* has one paper per week less than the other outlets in our sample.

‘Political coverage’ includes all news stories that mention the election, an Austrian politician, political party or other political institution. The print newspaper coverage was downloaded from the Austria Presse Agentur (APA) database², the online coverage was scraped daily, from the newspaper websites for the previous day. A news story that is updated or changed later on the same day is thus included as its final version, and counted only as one news story. However, if it is updated or edited again on the next day, both versions are counted.

All four indicators for democratic news quality are measured using automatic content analysis (search strings) in an online content analysis toolkit (<http://amcat.nl>, see Van Attevelde 2008), providing high reliability. Using automatic rather than manual content analysis makes it possible to include a larger amount of news coverage.

In addition to the quantitative content analysis described above, we also compared the general format of each print newspaper to its online edition to see which sections (such as letters to the editor, or opinion columns) overlapped or were missing from either version in order to contextualize our quantitative findings.

Operationalization

In the following section we will elaborate on the indicators used to map the normative criteria discussed above. For the ***amount of political news***, we used both the number of articles on politics published by a particular outlet as well as the average length (in number of words) of these articles.

Diversity was measured by semi-automatically coding whether a party is mentioned within an article or not. For this, we used search strings, that is, words or combinations of words that signify a specific party, so, e.g. SPÖ, but also social democrats³. We only included the nine political parties that took part in the national elections in all Austrian states (*Bundesländer*). The

¹ To be published in the GESIS data archive (<http://www.gesis.org/>) by the end of 2015.

² <http://www.apa.at/Site/index.de.html>

³ For the exact search strings, see Haselmayer et al. (forthcoming).

average precision for these search strings is 0.98, with no value lower than 0.88, and the average recall 0.95, with 0.86 as its lowest value.

The measure we used to calculate diversity is entropy in number equivalents, or the perplexity transformation of Shannon's H (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2015), which was calculated using the following formula:

$$diversity(n) = \prod_{i=party}^n \left(\frac{1}{p_i}\right)^{p_i}$$

where p_i stands for the proportion of media attention for a particular party relative to the media attention for all parties (Van Hoof et al. 2014). This transformation results in an easy to interpret score with a minimum of 1 (all media attention goes to one party) and a maximum that is equal to the number of categories for that variable, in our case, $n = 9$ (all nine parties get exactly the same share of media attention).

For *focus on leaders* we used search strings to semi-automatically code whether a political party and/or a top candidate of a political party was present in an article. A top candidate is the number one on the candidate list, who is often but not by definition also the party leader. Average precision for the search strings is 0.99 with 0.88 as the lowest score, and average recall is 0.95, with 0.64 as the lowest score⁴. 'Leader focus' was then operationalized as the share of articles mentioning a top candidate out of all articles that mention a political party or its politician(s). As for diversity, we included only the nine political parties that took part in the national elections in all Austrian states.

Emotionalization was measured as the share of emotion words out of all words used in a particular outlet (see Cho et al. 2003). We created a search string consisting of a slightly modified version of the sentiment lexicon Sentilex (Wolf et al. 2008) to measure the number of sentiment or emotion words (words referring to or provoking emotions) occurring in an article. Sentilex consists of all positive and negative sentiment words – nouns, adjectives and verbs— from a larger dictionary used in automatic text analysis, mostly in the domain of psychology, the German-language version of Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (*LIWC*, Pennebaker et al. 2001, Wolf et al. 2008). We modified the entries in this dictionary slightly in order to use it as a search

⁴ This one low score is for Frank Stronach, leader of the political party Team Stronach, where the similarity between the party name and the leader name leads to difficulties in distinguishing between the two using search strings. As no easy solution for this problem is available, and precision and recall values for all other search strings used for the leader focus variable were very high, we chose to keep the search string and the analysis as it is.

string, using wildcards (e.g. '*verlier**', 'to lose' or 'loser') wherever possible in order to include composite words and conjugations. Where this was not possible (e.g. searching for '*frei**', 'free*' in our data results in a large number of hits for '*Freitag*', 'Friday', which is not a sentiment word), we either entered all grammatical conjugations and relevant words separately, or chose to delete the word from the dictionary. The precision for this search string was 0.90, and the recall 0.89. We then calculated the degree of emotionalization, that is, the number of sentiment words per 100 words on the medium level.

Since we used the full political coverage as opposed to a sample, we conducted no significance tests.

Differences between print and online editions

Our first research question asked how political news during an election campaign in online editions in general compares to that in print editions in general. The results of this comparison using our full media sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. General comparison between print and online political news for our quality indicators.

Indicator	Print	Online	Difference
Average number of political stories per medium	1,587	891	-697
Average story length in words	237	448	+211
Party diversity (Entropy <i>E</i> , scale: 1-9)	6.27	6.74	+0.47
Stories focusing on a party leader	35.6%	47.2%	+11.7%
Degree of emotionalization	4.5%	4.0%	-0.5%

Online newspapers contain fewer news stories about politics. Their news stories are, however, almost twice as long, meaning that altogether, online editions provide more political coverage than print editions. If we take a closer look at these articles, we see that online media tend to publish very long (over 2,000 words) political articles regularly. They are often live blogs, stories that consist of photo slideshows with text underneath, or stories that reproduce tweets of politicians in addition to a core text. Letters to the editor were missing from the online edition.

Diversity is quite high online-- with a score of $E = 6.74$ out of 9. In print media it is a little bit lower at $E = 6.27$. Online editions pay slightly more attention to opposition parties and new parties than print editions. A focus on party leaders, however, is also more frequent online than in print outlets, confirming our hypothesis regarding this indicator (*H1*).

Lastly, emotion words are used slightly less often online than in print. Our hypothesis regarding this indicator is thus not confirmed (*H2*). Overall, the picture emerges of a different kind of news

coverage online as compared to print, with fewer but longer articles, in which more parties are included but that also focus more strongly on the leaders of these parties, and that contain fewer emotion words.

A gap between popular and elite news media?

In the next section, we investigate the potential gap in quality between popular and elite newspapers in their print and online editions.

Amount of political news

Table 2 shows our findings regarding the amount of political news stories during the election period, as well as their average length.

Table 2. Amount of political news in popular and elite media, print and online editions.

		Number of Stories		Average length	
		Print	Online	Print	Online
Elite	<i>Der Standard</i>	998	1493	298	409
	<i>Die Presse</i>	1191	1159	307	448
	<i>Salzburger Nachrichten</i>	834	1372	293	319
	Average	1008	1341	300	392
Popular	<i>Kronen Zeitung</i>	2253	269	175	429
	<i>Kurier</i>	1694	638	229	785
	<i>Österreich</i>	2554	413	121	299
	Average	2167	440	175	504
Difference Popular — Elite		+1159	-901	-125	+112

Somewhat surprisingly given their image of being low in political news, popular newspapers have more political news stories than elite newspapers in print, about twice as much in total. However, online this gap is reversed, and strongly so: here, elite newspapers contain three times more political stories than popular newspapers. Popular newspapers do publish longer news stories online on average, although this average is strongly influenced by one outlet, and does not compensate for the vastly lower amount of news stories, both compared to elite newspapers as well as to popular newspapers' own print editions. In sum, differences between media types in the amount of news are larger online than they are in print, to the advantage of elite newspapers.

Aside from this change in quantity, the types of news stories included in especially popular newspapers are also different online. In two of the three popular newspapers, certain sections prominent in the print edition were not included in the online editions, namely the opinion and letters from the editor sections. The other four (three elite and one popular) papers featured a

discussion forum (not counted as news stories) instead of a section for letters to the editor, but these papers did publish opinion columns in their online edition.

Diversity

For diversity, we saw that online versions in general are slightly more diverse than print versions. Table 3 gives an overview of party diversity in popular and elite newspapers, measuring how evenly media attention is distributed over the nine political parties that took part in the 2013 election.

Table 3. Party diversity in popular and elite media, print and online editions.

		Print		Online	
		N	Entropy	N	Entropy
Elite	<i>Der Standard</i>	808	6.65	1293	6.57
	<i>Die Presse</i>	877	6.50	1042	6.73
	<i>Salzburger Nachrichten</i>	697	6.05	1195	6.66
	Average		6.40		6.66
Popular	<i>Kronen Zeitung</i>	1502	6.01	205	6.76
	<i>Kurier</i>	1227	6.31	563	7.21
	<i>Österreich</i>	1882	6.11	380	6.52
	Average		6.14		6.83
Difference Popular—Elite			-0.26		+0.17

Note: N stands for the number of stories mentioning one or more political parties; diversity is measured in entropy in number equivalents (min. 1 – max. 9).

Nearly all individual outlets are more diverse online than in print. In the print editions, the elite newspapers tend to show more variation than the popular newspapers. Online, however, popular outlets catch up and are equally, if not more, diverse than elite outlets.

For this indicator, differences between media types in their diversity are smaller online than in print. Popular newspapers even slightly surpass elite newspapers in their online edition. Elite media provide more political news online than popular media, but all parties do not benefit equally: They provide many more stories about some parties, rather than a little bit more coverage of all.

Focus on leaders

The indicator ‘leader focus’ measures how strongly political coverage focuses on political leaders, at the expense of other politicians or parties. Results are shown in table 4.

Table 4. Leader focus in popular and elite media, print and online editions.

		Print		Online	
		N	Leader focus	N	Leader focus

Elite	<i>Der Standard</i>	808	42,2%	1293	36,6%
	<i>Die Presse</i>	877	39,0%	1042	43,5%
	<i>Salzburger Nachrichten</i>	697	22,5%	1195	31,8%
	Average		34,6%		37,3%
Popular	<i>Kronen Zeitung</i>	1502	31,8%	205	46,8%
	<i>Kurier</i>	1227	40,0%	563	64,5%
	<i>Österreich</i>	1882	37,9%	380	60,3%
	Average		36,6%		57,2%
Difference Popular—Elite			+2,0%		+19,9%

Note: N stands for the number of articles mentioning one or more political parties or its politician(s); leader focus is the percentage of these articles that mention one of more top candidate(s).

Leader focus is stronger online than in print for all outlets, with the exception of elite paper *Der Standard*. However, this difference is much larger for popular newspapers than for elite papers. In the print edition, popular and elite newspapers have a similarly strong focus on leaders. Online, however, this focus is strongly increased in popular newspapers. Notably, as much as 64.5% of all articles about a political actor in *Kurier* mention a top candidate.

In both popular and elite newspapers, leader focus is stronger online, but the difference in leader focus is much greater for popular papers than for elite papers. As the total amount of articles in popular media was also much smaller online than in print, it is more often the news about top candidates that makes it into the online edition, while the news about other political actors does not.

Emotionalization

The final indicator, emotionalization, is represented by the percentage of emotion words in the overall article text in political coverage, shown in table 5.

Table 5. Emotionalization in popular and elite media, print and online editions.

		Print		Online	
		Average Length	Emotionalization	Average Length	Emotionalization
Elite	<i>Der Standard</i>	298	4,5%	409	4,0%
	<i>Die Presse</i>	307	4,5%	448	4,0%
	<i>Salzburger Nachrichten</i>	293	4,5%	319	4,1%
	Average	300	4,5%	392	4,0%
Popular	<i>Kronen Zeitung</i>	175	5,0%	429	3,9%
	<i>Kurier</i>	229	4,4%	785	3,9%
	<i>Österreich</i>	121	4,3%	299	4,3%
	Average	175	4,6%	504	4,0%
Difference Popular - Elite			+0,1%		0,0%

Note: Average length shows the average word length of news stories in that outlet or type, emotionalization expresses the percentage of emotion words out of all words in the text.

In every outlet, the online version is less emotionalized than the print version. In the print edition, emotionalization is similar in popular and elite papers. Online, even though the amount of coverage is very different, both popular and elite newspapers show less emotionalization in their political coverage, a small difference of around 0.5 percent points. Furthermore, the emotionalization of news differs according to individual outlet rather than by type. Especially the *Kronen Zeitung* has less emotionalized political coverage online than in print, while for *Österreich*, online and print are emotionalized to an equal extent.

Differences in the emotionalization of political coverage in popular and elite newspapers are similar online and in print: For both, the share of emotion words in their coverage is about a half a percentage point less online than in print.

Discussion and conclusion

According to the electoral model of democracy, news media should provide sufficient political information which is diverse, not too strongly focused on leaders, and that is detached rather than emotionalized.

The online media environment is both a challenge and an opportunity for political news by these standards. Among the challenges are the hasty news cycle and the increased competition compared to the print market. Virtually unlimited space and interactivity online, however, carry great potentials for news high in quality. In our study, we found that online newspaper mainly take advantage of these possibilities. They provide their audiences with fewer, but also longer news stories, resulting in more political news overall. Online news also showed higher party diversity and less emotionalization. Rather than following a commercial logic, online newspapers in general provide a better coverage by electoral democratic standards.

However, by the same quality standards, the stronger focus on leaders in online editions makes online editions score worse than their print equivalents. An explanation for this focus could be the discussions of televised debates between top candidates in the media (Dolezal et al. 2014), which received even more attention in the online editions, as they could cover the debates in real-time. As leader focused coverage may lead to personalized voting rather than voting based on issue preferences (Takens et al. 2015), this could be a problem, especially if online coverage does not associate political leaders with their policy position (which could support issue-based voting).

Although our hypothesis regarding higher emotionalization online was not confirmed, an alternative explanation could be tested in further research. Namely, another assumed

characteristic of online news is its high reliance on press agency material (Boczkowski and De Santos 2007), which is presumably low in emotionalization. News story types unique to online editions, such as live blogs and photo slideshows, also appear to be low in emotionalization, although we did not study this separately. Perhaps the different news sources and news story types unique to online coverage thus explain its lower emotionalization compared to print newspapers. Whether this is true or not, and what the implications of this would be for its quality, would be a good topic for follow-up research.

Grouping all print newspapers or all online newspapers together, however, obscures differences between specific outlets in their approach to publishing online versions, as indicated by research in the UK. Taking a closer look at the individual news outlets, we found that the print version of popular newspapers contained more political news than the print version of elite newspapers, although their diversity was slightly lower. This is consistent with the finding of Magin and Stark (2014) who noted the high political involvement of the ‘people’s newspaper’ *Kronen Zeitung*. Our data suggest that this characteristic may apply to other Austrian popular newspapers as well, but only in their print edition. Leader focus and emotionalization were comparable to that in elite newspapers. In print, political news in elite and in popular newspapers is therefore rather similar in quality as measured by our indicators, although popular newspapers do even slightly better given their greater amount of political news.

The performance of Austrian news outlets in online editions, however, seems to be in line with studies of tabloids and tabloidization (e.g. Sparks 2000): Popular news outlets provide less political coverage than elite outlets. One reason for the lower amount of political news stories in online popular newspapers could be that especially for these papers, the online versions do not include certain sections that are prominent in the print edition.

Furthermore, we see this as a sign of a stronger influence of commercial logic in online editions of popular newspapers which focus strongly on those politicians that everyone knows and will recognize, instead of also giving other candidates a larger share of attention. Elite newspapers show this sign of commercialization less strongly.

The slightly higher diversity in popular newspapers is, however, not what we would expect following a commercialization scenario, but rather seems to confirm the view of popular media as paying more attention to alternatives than to the status quo (that is, to small parties) (Örnebring and Jönsson 2004). However, this holds only true for online editions, and only slightly so.

Lastly, the degree of emotionalization is fairly equal in elite and popular newspapers online, again corresponding to Magin and Stark’s (2014) findings about Austrian newspapers. Rather

than commercial logic, an explanation for the lower amount of emotionalization online, as mentioned previously, could be the live blogs, tweets and press agency material – descriptive or fact-oriented articles rather than the opinion pieces, analyses and reader letters, that are important in the print version. The lower use of emotion words hence appears to be a general characteristic of online news. Thus even though elite and popular newspapers show a number of similarities in their adaption of online news formats (greater diversity, lower emotionalization), elite newspapers are more successful than popular newspapers in providing good quality in their political coverage online: They offer much more of it and focus less on party leaders.

Overall, differences between popular and elite newspapers tend to be larger online than in print, to the disadvantage of popular newspapers. As such, our data seem to confirm what Sparks (2003; see also Rucht et al. 2008) found: The move from print towards online media may reinforce the gap between a well-informed elite audience and a lesser-informed audience for popular news, especially as more young people prefer online news media over other channels (e.g. Michtelstein and Boczkowski 2010). By corroborating the results for the UK for a country with a different political communication culture – more partisan news outlets (Lengauer and Johann 2013; Eberl et al. 2015) and a different political system with proportional representation and a large number of relevant parties – our Austrian case study encourages us to assume that these finding can be generalized to a larger context. However, further research is needed, particularly comparative research, to explore possible explanations for the gap in quality between political news in popular and elite papers.

Furthermore, within this article we focused on a specific democratic model and a corresponding set of indicators which were could be assessed via automatic content analysis. This, however, represents only a limited picture of what can be defined as 'political news quality', and only for the specific context of providing people with political information during election campaigns. We encourage future projects to explore the contribution of print and online media to democracy following other understandings of the role of media in a democracy so that a more complete picture may emerge over time.

Other interesting findings in our study suggest that the orientation function – providing readers with commentary and explanation rather than news facts only (Connell 1998) – of especially popular newspapers is at peril online, since opinion sections are not always included and analysis and commentary are de-emphasized. We argue that this function cannot be taken over by the additional sections unique to online versions, such as live blogs, photo collections, or reader fora, as in particular the latter may provide lots of opinion, but little structure and orientation for its readers. While online editions in general thus perform slightly better than their print counterparts following the quality criteria used here, they have their own specific

pitfalls, which need to be examined further in order to understand their (potential) consequences for democracy.

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